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Widening the Narrow Gauge

"The little engines, coaches and freight cars made their last regular runs on the Narrow Gauge system today", announced a dispatch from Washington, Iowa, in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* on June 28, 1902. "Conductor Moreland and Engineer Pierce's train between here and Winfield will make its four regular trips today for the last time. There will be no service for the public tomorrow. Early in the morning the remaining coaches and freight cars which have not been sold will be run into Burlington. It is the intention of the company to have the entire system widened out tomorrow. Chicago, Burlington and Quincy rolling stock will be pressed into service Monday and used until the new rolling stock for the B. & N. W. is built."

It was with no little regret that many of the patrons of the road witnessed the passing of the "cozy little trains". Particularly was this true of the younger generation whose sense of appreciation for the diminutive had not yet been fully outgrown. However, the advantages which were to accrue by the operation of standard gauge equipment far outweighed all sentimentality.

Efforts were made to dispose of the obsolete rolling stock as advantageously as possible. The freight cars were offered for sale at ten dollars each. Since they were readily adaptable for use as coal houses, chicken coops, and small granaries, they were eagerly snapped up as bargains. Many were sold and some may yet be seen in farm yards along the line, still in serviceable condition. The engines and coaches, about ten each, were moved west, to be used on other narrow gauge Burlington lines in Colorado.

On Sunday, June 29, 1902, a remarkable engineering feat was accomplished. Approximately 125 miles of rails were transposed from the narrow gauge of three feet to the standard gauge of four feet eight and one-half inches. And the job was virtually completed between daylight and dark.

Much preliminary work and planning was necessary before the day upon which the actual transfer was made. The original iron rails being small were all replaced with heavier steel. Considerable road-bed had to be widened to carry the longer cross ties for the broad gauge track, which likewise required the rebuilding of many culverts and bridges, as well as other minor alterations such as changing switch stands and depot and stockyard platforms. Much of this general prep-

aration was accomplished so gradually, over a period of several years, that the public was scarcely aware of what was taking place.

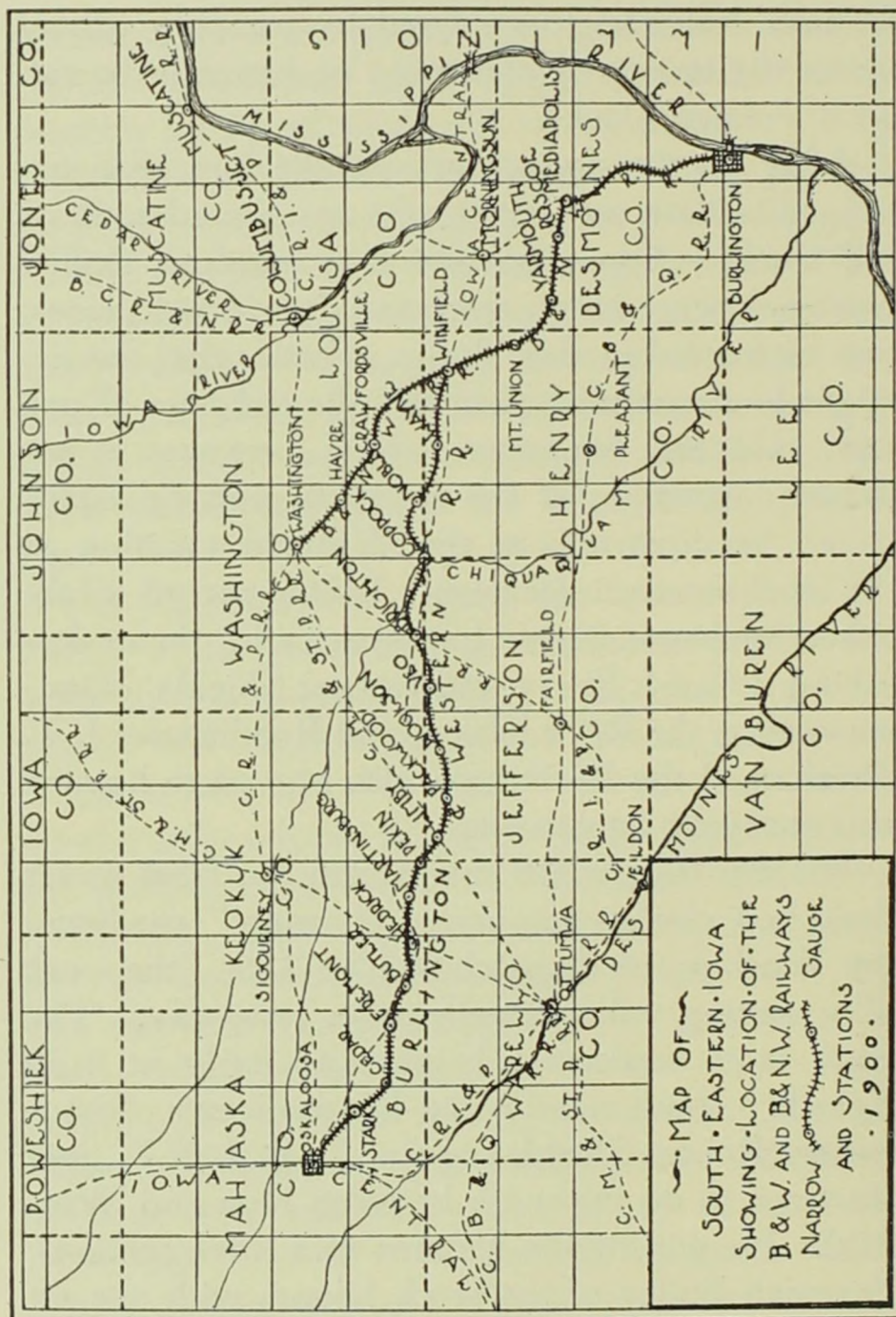
Practically the first intimation of the project was from a news item published in the *Oskaloosa Herald* on April 19, 1900, under the caption "To Widen Out". From that time preparations moved more rapidly. Especially during the last six weeks preceding the widening, materials such as spikes, plates, angle iron, frogs, and crossings were distributed along the line at the proper places.

For the purpose of cutting the seat in which the rails were to rest in their new position on the uneven ties, a unique "adzing" machine was designed and constructed in the Burlington shops. It consisted of two gangs of circular saws mounted the correct distance apart upon the opposite ends of a single shaft which could be lowered to the ties. This machine, installed upon a small flat car and operated by steam power, was run over the entire road, cutting uniform grooves as it went, thus accomplishing in a few days what would have required the services of many men all summer. Moreover, the work done in this manner was truer and more satisfactory than would have been possible to accomplish by hand. Low places of course could not be remedied in this

fashion, but had to be fixed by tamping gravel under the ties or by shimming up beneath the rail with wooden blocks.

After all the preliminary details had been arranged, a date was set for the actual widening of the track. Approximately five hundred skilled workmen were hired, stationed at selected places, and instructed in their duties in order that the job might be accomplished in the allotted time of one day. General Manager Robert Law was in supreme command for the occasion, and he established headquarters at the Winfield junction as the most strategic location. By the record established he demonstrated his capacity for the undertaking. C. McEnery and Robert Shields, Roadmasters on the Rock Island, and Roadmaster J. T. Sheehan of the Burlington also proved to be able and energetic lieutenants.

"Before the people have rolled out from under their bed clothes tomorrow morning," predicted the Washington dispatch of June 28th, "the work of widening will be well under headway. The work is to commence bright and early at 4:30 o'clock. With nearly one hundred men, Roadmaster Robert Shields, of the C. R. I. & P., will start out to do the work between here and Winfield. He will divide his men into three sections. Foreman Bailey of the Rock Island, with one set



of men, will remain here and do the work in the yards of this city. All the spikes are ready, some of the outside ones being driven. The inside spikes holding the Narrow Gauge rails have been drawn with the exception of four to a rail. The rails can be taken up and placed quickly tomorrow by pulling the four remaining spikes and turning the rail over to its place. The work between Winfield and Burlington and Winfield and Oskaloosa has been assigned to workmen from the C. B. & Q., and the B. C. R. & N. and the Hannibal and St. Joe and other lines."

The last regular narrow gauge train to leave Oskaloosa was the Saturday evening 6:15 passenger running eastward to Burlington. Later, however, a special train in charge of Conductor "Billy" Moreland, drawn by engine No. 38 with Engineer N. Beather at the throttle, Frank Borton firing, and Ray Wells performing the duties of brakeman, carried about two hundred workmen out along the line. Sharply at "4 o'clock the last narrow gauge train pulled out" of Oskaloosa.

Groups of men, distributed at intervals of four miles, immediately began the task of converting the narrow gauge into a broad gauge road. The last gang disembarked at a spot about midway between Hedrick and Martinsburg, whereupon the train backed to Hedrick, ran on a side track,

and the engine was "killed" forthwith and put out of service. "A dead engine and abandoned equipment standing apart on the siding made a picture that will not soon be forgotten by those who saw it and it was generally regretted that the condition of the day made the taking of photographs impossible."

At four-thirty Sunday morning a delegation of Burlington newspaper men accompanied by representatives of the *Galesburg Mail* and the *Chicago Times-Herald* boarded the narrow gauge construction train carrying about one hundred and fifty "sturdy tracksmen, who proceeded to the scene of the contest against time and the elements". It was the last narrow gauge train to leave Burlington. Having distributed workmen at prearranged intervals along the line to a point beyond Brighton, this train was backed to Brighton where it was sidetracked as obsolete. This equipment, as well as that at Hedrick, was later hauled back to Burlington on standard cars.

Laborers worked mostly in gangs of from sixteen to twenty. Usually six men were assigned to pull the spikes, four to move the loosened rails into place, and six to drive the spikes which fastened the rails in their new position. The others finished any necessary odd jobs. Each gang was in charge of an experienced foreman.

Such strenuous work required ample quantities of food, and the company made liberal provision for the meals of the men during the day — breakfast, dinner, and supper. Contracts were let for supplying forty-five hundred sandwiches, or about fifteen per man, for the entire day. Five hundred dozen hard boiled eggs were also prepared, about a dozen for each man. Many brought supplementary lunches of their own. The provisions were distributed by the same train that brought the crew, while coffee and a barrel of water were deposited at stated distances.

From his headquarters at Winfield, General Manager Law directed the work "both by wire and in person." By his calm demeanor he appeared to strangers as an unconcerned spectator, but he was actually "keeping the wires hot" as the work progressed. He gave no heed to wind and rain; his only anxiety was to get through.

And how those gangs did work! It was no picnic. The job was done under most unfavorable circumstances. Not only was the ground soggy, but a cold, incessant rain beat down all day upon the hurrying workmen. While the spectators admired the systematic procedure and the foresight with which equipment had been provided, they could not but admire most the "patience and fortitude, the grim, silent determination

which possessed all concerned in the work, from the chief who directed it, down to the muscular fellows who without murmur plied their sledges throughout the day, drenched to the skin — all working as if the balmy breezes of June were cooling them and a gentle sun was shining upon their efforts."

No event had occurred since the opening of the line a quarter of a century before that attracted so much attention as the widening of the gauge. Thousands of people flocked to the stations to watch the men at their work and to greet with applause the first standard gauge train that rolled in sight. "It was no mere idle curiosity that caused these people to leave their comfortable homes and brave the inclement weather. Many well informed people were out, and they were fully impressed with the importance of the change."

What the spectators missed was the "peculiar cheerful music of the steel hammer ringing on the spike. Under favorable conditions it would have been a great anvil chorus" that was played along the line that day. But the rain had continued so long the ground was saturated and did not offer the proper resistance to the tie as the spikes were driven home by the lusty strokes of the men.

While no particular speed contests were conducted, there were sections that reported as much

as one mile an hour. Others made slower time, the conditions being less favorable, but there was no lagging anywhere along the line. Some fast spurts made by the different gangs were two miles by H. Jackson near Winfield in two hours; and three miles in three hours by J. T. Sheehan between Hedrick and Martinsburg including a crossing of the Central Iowa. Roadmaster Calvin made three and a half miles in three and a quarter hours. Starting from Mediapolis as soon as the up train had passed, McEnery made his allotted four miles by ten o'clock while the gang working to meet him from the opposite direction was still almost two miles distant. Although his men were tired, they worked on, widening an additional mile in another hour.

Running east from Oskaloosa, the first broad gauge train was the Burlington "extra" which had brought the workmen up from Ottumwa over the Rock Island. It followed the widening of the rails and was run as a regular morning passenger, No. 24, leaving Oskaloosa nearly seven hours late and not arriving in Burlington until after two o'clock Monday morning. Equipped with flat cars and passenger coaches, it picked up tools and extra supplies as well as gathering up the men for their homeward journey. Slowly the train pushed eastward, being compelled to wait occasionally at

railroad crossings where installation was most difficult. Most of the delay occurred near Brighton, however, where a temporary strike had been inaugurated. Another wait was occasioned by the accidental derailing of a car on a freight train near Coppock. The east-bound passenger met the regular west-bound train, "The Fox", at Coppock where the crews changed trains and returned to the terminal whence they had started.

At Coppock the workmen were called from their comfortable coaches to widen a switch track so that the trains might pass. Inasmuch as this job was done after darkness by lantern light it took a long time. To the passengers it seemed as though orders would never come for the train to proceed. During the weary wait an improvised press banquet was held, attended by the Burlington reporters as well as the newspaper men on the east-bound train from Oskaloosa. Though "the menu was not very elaborate, there were no complaints upon that score."

It was past midnight before the return journey to Burlington was resumed. The "down" train ran surprisingly smooth and silently, due to the "soft condition of the road-bed — and comparatively good time was made." The coaches were filled to capacity with tired, soaked, weary men. It was no occasion for "hilarity, celebration, trou-

ble, or noise." The men were so exhausted that they went to sleep in the most grotesque and uncomfortable positions imaginable. "In one of the cars a sextette of young men, several of whom had pleasant voices and knew how to use them, whiled away an hour with familiar songs", but they had no audience for there was "no sign of approval or of protest from the weary toilers, who were apparently dead to the world."

Roadmaster McEnery became reminiscent as he chatted with the reporters on the train. "We have established a world-wide record today", he declared, for transforming "a narrow gauge to a standard road, and have smashed all previous attempts by fully thirty-six hours." The best previous record, he said, was the widening of sixty-five miles of road in two days.

"Twenty-six years ago, June '76, I remember the first rail I laid for the B. & W.", he continued. "And now today I've witnessed the windup of the narrow gauge and again assisted in starting a project in which the farmers and citizens are rejoicing as much as they did twenty-six years ago this month."

BEN HUR WILSON